



## **R.I. e911 call leads to company's answer**

**Internet phone company Vonage is announcing today its new service to locate emergency calls using VOIP systems.**

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Vonage, one of the nation's largest Internet phone companies, plans to announce today that, as a result of working with Rhode Island's e911 center, the company has found a solution to a key drawback to Internet telephone service.

The state agency and Vonage have scheduled a news conference today to announce that it has devised a way to handle emergency 911 calls made over the Internet. The announcement will be made at the National Press Club in Washington D.C.

"That solution essentially allows our customers to dial 911 from a Vonage line," said Jeffrey Cintron, chief executive officer of Vonage, based in Edison, N.J.

"We know where you are and know where we are supposed to send the call," Cintron said in a telephone interview yesterday.

Vonage is one of several companies offering what is known as Voice Over Internet Protocol service, a burgeoning telecommunications technology that sends phone calls over the Internet at low cost.

But a key drawback to VOIP services is that 911 calls don't always end up where they are supposed to. Or they don't automatically identify the location from which the call is made, a capability that's been required of traditional phone companies for years.

Vonage determines where to route the call based on customers' addresses they used to register for the service, as well as a database of local 911 centers that is operated by Intrado, a Denver-based company that offers 911 services.

Vonage's solution came as a result of an unusual call to Rhode Island's Emergency 911 center in North Providence in April.

It wasn't the nature of the emergency that was different. Rather, it was the fact that the call rang on the center's administrative line instead of the emergency line answered by trained 911 operators.

Officials at the 911 center discovered later that the emergency call was routed to the wrong phone line because it was made with a new type of phone service that sends calls over the Internet.

"When this call came in, I said we can't wait, we have to move it right away," said Raymond Labelle, executive director of the state's 911 center.

The challenge confronting Labelle, as well as public-safety officials around the country, is how 911 calls routed over the Internet are handled properly.

Dozens of companies, including AT&T and Verizon, have begun offering VOIP service, which uses a customer's existing high-speed Internet connection to transmit telephone calls.

Subscribing to a VOIP service involves getting a device the size of an answering machine that connects a regular telephone to a cable or DSL modem. Calls travel through the Internet, and at some point, are usually routed back to the traditional telephone network. The quality of an Internet call is often as good as a regular phone call.

The main appeal of VOIP service is its price, which is generally cheaper than traditional phone service with comparable calling plans. For example, AT&T's CallVantage Internet service is \$29.99 a month, and it includes unlimited local and long-distance calling, and a host of other bells and whistles.

Pinpointing an Internet caller's location presents the same problem as finding a cell-phone caller, Cintron said. That's because Vonage's service, as well as most other VOIP services, is portable. A customer can move, taking the device used to place Internet phone calls anywhere there is a high-speed Internet connection.

Vonage, which has about 300,000 customers nationwide, will turn on the 911 feature in Rhode Island "soon" Cintron said. It will roll out the feature in other markets as it completes tests with local 911 centers, he said.

Another company, Providence Telephone, said it offers VOIP service with full 911 service.

The North Smithfield-based company of four employees sells service on behalf of RNK TeleCom, based in Bedford, Mass. Since RNK is registered as a traditional phone company with regulators in Rhode Island and three other states, it already has the technology in place to provide caller locations to 911 centers, said Rob Blanchard, president of Providence Telephone.

RNK has extended that technology to work with its VOIP service as well, Blanchard said.

Other VOIP carriers do offer a limited type of 911 service, connecting a caller to a 911 center, but not necessarily to the emergency line. And most do not yet transmit the caller's phone number and address automatically.

"We will start providing that capability before the end of the year," said Gary Morgenstern, a spokesman for AT&T's CallVantage service.

Verizon, which offers an Internet phone service called VoiceWing, said it is also working on the problem.

"Obviously it's a top priority for us and we certainly are working on it." said Lillian McGee, a spokeswoman for Verizon.

She said the company is evaluating a 911 solution, but she could not say when it would be available to customers.

So far, the Federal Communications Commission has decided not to regulate VOIP service. But it has established a working group to examine exactly how it should fulfill its role of "safeguarding the public interest," according to the FCC Web site.

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